

A Long Way Back by Imharmon (orphan_account)

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Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Steve Harrington, Will Byers

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Summary:

In December 1985, a few days before Christmas, two individuals show up in Hawkins. One is Barbara Holland, seemingly returned from the dead. The other is Aria Harrington, a mysterious woman who claims she's from the future, there to help with events that are about to unfold. Hopper and the gang must figure out who they can trust, before it's too late.

1. Prologue

6:03pm

Friday, November 3, 2017

FBI National Academy - Quantico, Virginia

Exhausted after a long day, a middle-aged man stands outside an office door in the basement of the FBI Academy. There is a plaque beside the door that reads:

Steven Harrington

Paranormal Investigations Faculty Lead

In one hand, the man has clutched a mound of papers that need graded. With his other hand, he fumbles around in his pockets, looking for his keys. Finally, the man finds them in his left breast pocket and opens the door. Absently, he goes to turn on the light and is startled when he realizes it's already on. His eyes immediately shoot to the middle of the room, where someone is sitting in his office chair, a woman not much younger than himself. She's thumbing through some files that he'd left out, her feet propped up on his desk.

"Hi, Steve," she says, not looking up from whatever she's reading.

"Jane," Steve says. He feels as though he's been punched in the gut. He knows what's coming. He'd been waiting for it. But that didn't make it any easier.

"If someone had told me 30 years ago that this is where you'd end up, I wouldn't have believed them." Jane finally looks up at him, holding up a photo from one of his files. A crop circle. Everyone always joked that it was aliens. It wasn't.

Steve stalked across the room, grabbed the photo from her, and shoved it back in its file. "You're one to talk."

Jane shrugged. "I was never meant to be normal."

"You could have been normal."

Jane ignores this. "How's Ari doing?" she asks.

Steve clenches his fists involuntarily. "Fine."

"She just had a birthday, didn't she? Twenty-five years old. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You know what that means."

"No."

Jane sighs. "You know, this is the only reason they let you keep her. To be her handler. You assured them you'd do what needed to be done. You can't chicken out now. And besides, as far as we know, she turns out fine."

"Not yet."

Jane sighs again. "Where is she, anyway?"

Steve doesn't respond.

Jane laughs. "You don't know where she is, do you?"

Steve still doesn't respond.

Jane stands up. "Well, I'm sure she'll come out of the woodwork if something happens to you."

Steve immediately tenses and looks over his shoulder, half-expecting to see an FBI goon there, ready to take him out.

Jane rolls her eyes. "That was a joke. You know we wouldn't do that." After a pause, she says, "But you also know she does have to come in. And you're the only one that knows how to contact her."

With that, she slipped out from behind Steve's desk and was out the door before Steve could think how to respond.

For several minutes, Steve stood frozen, trying to figure out what to do next. Eventually, he let out an unintelligible noise of frustration

and chucked the ungraded papers on his desk, turned off the lights, locked his office door, and headed up to the parking lot. Perhaps he'd have better luck thinking at home.

He was greeted by surprisingly warm, night air when he stepped out of the Academy building and into the already nearly empty parking lot. Thank God for Friday nights, Steve thinks, taking the opportunity to enjoy the quiet. Though he usually likes the hustle and bustle of the Academy, sometimes it's nice to slow down for a bit. Especially now.

Just as Steve reaches his car, he hears a crackle of energy behind him, and then a voice. "Hi, Dad."

"You shouldn't be here."

Jane had been right that Ari had recently turned 25. Three days ago, to be exact. But she had rarely been right about anything else when it came to Ari. To Jane, Ari was just a means to an end. But to Steve, she was the whole world. He'd held her when she cried over her first broken heart. He'd gone with her the 3 times she'd attempted to pass her driving test, barely able to uncover his eyes, and breathing a sigh of relief when she finally passed on the 4th try. He'd seen her graduate as valedictorian from her high school, and summa cum laude from New York University.

But since then, over the last few years, Steve had watched Ari slip farther and farther away, the events that were soon to take place weighing down on her. Instead of searching for a full-time job after college, she'd chosen to spend her time using her abilities to hop across the globe, taking odds and ends jobs to make money. Steve had wished he'd known what words to say, to make things easier. But he'd said the wrong thing too many times. When Ari was 10, he explained to her how she'd come to live with him, and why. She'd been far too young, he'd realized later. He'd wanted her to be prepared. But there was no way to prepare for your destiny being predetermined by someone else.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Steve says again.

Ari came up to stand beside him. She was wearing a leather jacket over a plain white t-shirt, jeans with an unreasonable amount of holes in them, and white sneakers that had seen better days. Her dreadlocks were pulled into a bun on top of her head. Causal young adult, she’d called that look. But the expression on her face said anything but that. “If I don’t go, you could die. You all could die,” she says. “Or, that’s what I’ve been led to believe, anyway. You, nor Jane, will tell me any more than that.”

Steve sighed. She’d been listening. “Because you didn’t know what was going to happen when you got there. And we don’t know that things won’t be fine. We’ve talked about this.”

“I know. You think things will sort themselves out without me, and the timeline will stay pretty much the same. Except you won’t adopt me, because I’ll be nobody to you.”

“You’d have a chance at a normal life,” Steve says.

“Fuck normal.”

While the events that took place in Steve’s hometown of Hawkins, Indiana in the 1980’s were unique, Jane Hopper’s origin story was not. It turned out that all across the country, since at least the 1950’s, laboratories not so different from Hawkins’ had been kidnapping and experimenting on children. Some primarily focused on creating children with first generation abilities, meaning making an ungifted child gifted. Others had been experimented on because of assumed inherited abilities. While Jane Hopper belonged to the latter category, Aria Harrington belonged to the former.

In June 1997, an FBI raid had shut down a laboratory in Syracuse, New York that had housed 47 children. Ari had been one of them, a five-year-old known simply as Test Subject 021. But the moment Steve, then a field agent, laid eyes on her, he knew exactly who she was. Or would be. While the rest of the children would be placed in foster care until they could be found permanent homes, Ari would go

home with Steve, to hone her abilities.

Though it took some time, Ari would eventually develop the ability to travel through space - teleportation - and, occasionally, time. The time travel had always been tricky, though. It was unclear to Steve, and everyone else he thought to ask, how time could or couldn't be changed. Time travel was relatively new territory, even for the Paranormal Investigations division of the FBI. And so, he'd encouraged Ari to do as little of it as possible. Until she had to, of course.

Ari also had some telepathic abilities; like Jane, she was able to enter a sort of mental void, where she could observe people in different physical locations. She could also mind read, and could use memories from another person to take herself somewhere she'd never been, or even heard of.

The biggest difference between Ari and Jane's abilities though, was that, for Jane, using them had always been a struggle, often making her nose bleed. As she'd gotten older, this had made it more and more difficult for her to use them. Ari, on the other hand, could use her abilities with relative ease.

Still, you'd think, given their similarities, that Jane would have been the person best suited to raise Ari. But it was thanks to Jane, who had started out as an FBI consultant because of her background but eventually become an agent herself, that the Agency had known about Ari in the first place. Jane had led them to believe that without Ari, the timeline couldn't be preserved. This had made Steve lose trust in Jane, as they'd previously agreed that they'd handle it on their own, outside the FBI. So when young Ari finally stumbled into their lives, Steve insisted that he be the one to raise her. Jane hadn't put up much of a fight. She'd just warned him that one day he'd have to do the "right" thing. Steve suspected that Jane's ruthlessness was the reason she was still a field agent, and he'd been dumped at the Academy. In the basement, no less.

Fuck normal. Steve shook his head. "If you'd been raised in a normal home, you wouldn't say that."

Ari looked amused. "What, most dads don't teach their daughters how to travel to London in a matter of seconds?"

Steve couldn't help but smile. "Is that where you've been?"

Ari nodded, smiling, too.

Their smiles slowly faded. "Couldn't I just go back to when Jane tells the FBI about me, and stop her? Then, at least we wouldn't have them breathing down our necks." Ari sometimes talked like she'd forgotten who Steve worked for. Perhaps it was on purpose.

Steve suddenly looked very old, and very sad. "Maybe it would have been better if I'd just taken you and ran."

"Running? How would that have been any better?" Ari asks.

Steve looked away. "But isn't that what you're doing to yourself now? Running?"

Before Ari can respond, something hits Steve's neck, startling them both. A tranq dart, Ari realizes. She turns. Three men in suits stand in the deserted parking lot about 10 feet away from them. One still had a tranq gun pointed at Steve. Another had a regular gun pointed at her. The third had his hands in his pockets, looking smug. Ari didn't recognize any of them. "Well, we weren't expecting you to be here, Aria," he says. "But this certainly makes things easy."

Ari tenses and reaches for Steve, ready to jump if they need to. "Are you with Jane?"

The smug man laughs. "No. But she is with us. Not willingly, though. Let's just say that not everyone at the FBI agrees with the decisions that have been made in regard to...you." He looks her dead in the eye. "Fuck the timeline," he says. Then, to the man with the gun, he says, "Shoot her."

It all happens quickly then.

Ari's first reaction is to turn back to Steve, who has collapsed to the ground, but is still conscious. "Get somewhere safe," he says, squeezing her arm.

Ari makes to jump, but then, just as she does so, she feels a searing pain in her right shoulder. I've been shot, she thinks. She jerks backward from the impact, Steve's grip leaving her arm.

Everything goes black.

2. The Great Christmas Tree Crash of 1985

7:58pm

Friday, December 21, 1985

Hopper Household - Hawkins, Indiana

“Lucas! You forgot to bring Doritos!?” Mike exclaimed, throwing Lucas’ Doritos-less grocery bag back at him. “That’s the one thing I specifically told you to bring!”

“If you wanted them so damn bad, you should have brought them yourself,” Lucas shot back, pulling out the Tostitos and Lay’s he’d brought, and pouring them into bowls.

“My mom’s on one of her kicks. No junk food until after Christmas dinner,” Mike whined, looking down at his own measly offerings of fruit and a cheese board.

“Did she think you were going to a book club?” Max joked, picking up a grape and popping it in her mouth. Mike stuck his tongue out at her.

“I brought cookies,” Will said triumphantly, holding out a plate of various Christmas-themed sweets. “Mom helped me make them.”

“And you did an amazing job, sweetie,” Ms. Byers said, suddenly appearing in the kitchen and giving her son a kiss on the cheek.

Chief Hopper and Jane appeared behind her. “Okay, the living room is officially ready for movie viewing. Are the snacks ready?” Hopper asked, scanning the kitchen. “Where’s the popcorn!? Did nobody make the popcorn!?”

“Uh...we forgot,” Dustin said, his mouth full of Christmas cookie.

Hopper sighed. “Okay, you guys get in there. I’ll make the popcorn,” he said. “But don’t start without me!”

Since this was Jane’s first official Christmas, the last two having been spent keeping a low profile, Hopper had insisted on having a Christmas movie night, to catch her up on all the “classics”

that she hadn't seen yet. This included: A Christmas Story, It's a Wonderful Life, and Frosty the Snowman. The rest of the kids were less than thrilled, as they had all seen these movies multiple times, but they indulged, for Jane.

Just then, the back door that led into the kitchen opened, and a head peaked around it. "Were you guys just about to start without me!?"

"Steve!" Dustin shouted as the rest of Steve appeared from behind the door. Dustin rushed over to hug him. "You came!"

"Yeah, of course, buddy," Steve said, hugging him back.

"Hey, Steve. How's college?" Hopper asked. "Did you just get back?"

"Yeah, I, uh, just got back a few hours ago," Steve said. He'd started studying at the University of Evansville in August. "It's going...good."

"Have you decided on a major yet?" Ms. Byers asked.

"Uh, no, not yet."

Ms. Byers smiled reassuringly. "You'll figure it out."

Just then, a crackling sound, and then a loud crash came from the living room. Then someone moaned.

"What the hell?" Hopper said. Putting the popcorn down, he made his way toward the living room. Ms. Byers and Steve followed. "Kids, stay here," Hopper said.

"Stay here," Steve repeated, seeing Dustin try to follow anyway.

In the living room, the three of them found that the Hopper's Christmas tree has been knocked over and that a young woman was sprawled on the floor beside it. She moaned again, her eyes closed. "What the hell?" Hopper said again.

Ms. Byers hesitantly knelt beside the woman and put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay, honey?"

The contact made the woman wince, and Ms. Byers quickly pulled

her hand away. When she did, she saw that it was covered in blood. "Jim, she's bleeding. I think she's been shot."

The woman opened her eyes then, and stared up at them. Her eyes went from Ms. Byers, to Hopper, then landed on Steve. Her face scrunched up in confusion. "Dad?" she said.

Ms. Byers and Hopper looked from the woman to Steve. Steve shrugged. "She's obviously older than me. How could I be her dad!?"

They all looked back at the woman. "Jim, you need to call an ambulance," Ms. Byers said.

"No, please don't do that," the woman said weakly, but was drowned out by the kids marching into the room. "What's going on?" Mike demanded. "Who's that?" Max asked, looking past them at the bleeding woman.

"Kids, get out of here!" Hopper said, herding them back into the kitchen before going to make a phone call.

"Yeah, this is Sheriff Hopper..."

1:54am
Saturday, December 22, 1985
Roane County Hospital - Roane, Indiana

Hours later, Ari woke up in a hospital bed, her shoulder throbbing. She tried to sit up, but immediately laid back down, her head spinning.

"Yeah, you might want to wait a bit on that. You just came off of anesthesia." Ari looked to her left. A bearded man in a sheriff's uniform was sitting in a chair beside her bed. He looked as tired as she felt.

"Anesthesia?"

"They had to remove some bullet fragments from your shoulder."

“What happened?”

“You don’t remember?”

Ari shook her head, then immediately regretted it.

“Alright. Well, somehow you ended up in my living room, and knocked over the Christmas tree my daughter and I worked really hard on. Thanks for that, by the way.

Anyway, we realized you’d been shot - entry and exit wound - and obviously called an ambulance. The medics showed up, examined you, were able to stop the bleeding, and started a saline drip to help with your blood pressure, or whatever. Then lights and sirens and you were off.

Unfortunately, because I am the police chief, and you are a gunshot victim, I had to follow you here to the hospital to get a police report. So, what I gather has happened since you’ve been here is that the doctors first did some x-rays and an MRI, and decided based on that that you needed to have a quick surgery to remove the previously mentioned bullet fragments.

So, here we are, post-surgery, and you are recovering from anesthesia. The doctors said in an hour or two, assuming there are no complications, you can be discharged. They gave you some bandages, a sling, and some antibiotics to take with you,” the man finished, indicating a small, white package on the bedside table.

“Oh! They also recommended some light physical therapy, whatever that means.”

But Ari barely heard anything he said. After he’d starting talking, her memories had come rushing back. Eavesdropping on her dad’s and Jane’s conversation, approaching her dad in the FBI Academy parking lot, the three men who’d attacked them, and...

The next thing she remembered, she stumbled into something prickly - a Christmas tree, apparently - then fallen to the ground. She remembered a woman asking her if she was okay, and grabbing her shoulder, causing her more pain than she’s already been in. She

remembered...

Dad. But not her dad. He was young, like she'd seen in old photos. From the 1980's.

Shit.

So it wasn't just being shot that was making her feel so tired. Though Ari could use most of her abilities without much effort, time travel took a lot out of her. And she'd never traveled this far before. I wonder how long it will be before I can make it back home? She needed to rescue her dad from those men.

Of course, she could travel back to that same moment at any time, even if it was three days from now. A more pressing question she had was how she had even made it to the 80's in the first place. If this had happened the way she'd expected it to, she would have been briefed first, by her dad and by Jane, and they'd have given her the memories she needed to come to the right place. But she hadn't been given any memories. Or had she? She tried to think back again to the last few moments before she jumped, but she only remembered thinking about getting back to her flat in London...

Ari is pulled out of her thoughts by a hand waving in front of her face. "Hello? Are you in there?" the bearded sheriff asked. Ari glances in his direction. "Guess so. So, part of my duties as sheriff involve asking you a few questions. That okay?"

Ari doesn't respond, and instead racks her brain, trying to figure out a way to handle her situation. Another part of the briefing would have been to give her an idea of what she could and couldn't say while she was here. Her dad had given her a few clues over the years, but outside of that, she'd just have to wing it. But I guess that's what I was always supposed to do, they just didn't know it.

Ari glances at the bearded man again. She thinks she knows who this man is - Sheriff Jim Hopper, Jane's adopted father. Ari met him once, when she and her dad had come to Indiana to visit his parents. In Ari's time, he was in his 70's, and retired. Ari thought she could trust him, and frankly, she figured getting him on her side was the fastest way to get whatever was about to happen sorted out. But she wasn't

sure how likely he was to actually believe her story. She knew Hawkins had seen some weird things, but...

“Okay! I’ll take that as a yes. First things first: do you know who shot you?”

Some asshole from 2017 who is probably in diapers right now, if he’s even been born yet.

“No, don’t want to answer that? Then how about this: do you know where you first came into contact with the suspect? In my living room?”

I didn’t realize this guy was such a smartass.

“And what about that number on your wrist? 021? Did that have something to do with it?”

Ari looked down and realized that, in her hospital gown, her wrists were exposed. The 021 stared up at her. She tucked her arm under the blanket and didn’t answer Hopper’s question.

Hopper sighed and picked something up from behind his chair. It was the bag Ari had been carrying. Her wallet was perched on top. Well, shit.

“When you were first brought in, you weren’t exactly conscious, so I went through your bag - sorry - to see if I could find a possible emergency contact. I didn’t find that, but I did find some interesting ID’s in your wallet, from several different countries. Alexis Poole in Brazil, Christine Roydon in France, Aria Harrington in the United States - which is where we are, so hi, Aria, I guess, Laverne Harlow in the United Kingdom, Patsy Queen in Jamaica... And, also interesting, they all say that you were born in the early 1990’s, in about seven years, and they all seem to have issue dates of 2013 or later, so in nearly 30 years... The most interesting thing, though, was this...” Hopper pulled out her laptop and cell phone. “Now, I’m no tech expert, but these appear to be some very... advanced computers.” Hopper stared at her expectantly. “You want to explain any of that?”

Ari simply stared back at him.

As if on cue, a man dressed as a police officer entered the room, looking nervous. “Chief,” the deputy said. “I need to talk to you.”

“Whatever it is, can you take care of it, Powell? I’m in the middle of something.”

“No,” Powell said sharply.

Hopper, surprised by Powell’s tone, slowly stood up, put Ari’s stuff down on the edge of the bed, and made to follow the officer out of the room. As he did, he turned back to speak to Ari. “I’m not done with you.”

Yeah, sure you’re not. Though, at the moment, Ari was more concerned about what had the police officer spooked. Was it something she needed to know?

Ari attempted to sit up again, slowly, and this time, was able to stay up. She may not have been able to get back home yet, but she could do this. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and without physically moving, followed Hopper and Powell out into the hallway.

Powell was dragging Hopper into a corner, out of earshot of the doctors and nurses. “Powell, what is so important that-”

Powell interrupted, “Do you remember Barbara Holland? The girl that died in that big government cover-up?”

“Yeah, Powell, my memory’s not that bad. What about her?”

“She’s alive.”

“What?”

“The Cooper’s apparently found her wandering around in their field. Or, their dog did. Wouldn’t stop barking, woke them up. Anyway, she’s all scratched up. She claims she was kidnapped, and just escaped. She’s on her way to the hospital n-”

“Shit, Powell, why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

“Well-”

“What officer was at the scene?”

“Callahan.”

Hopper pulled out his radio and shouted into it. “Callahan!”

To Powell, he asked, “Do you know if the press are aware of this yet?”

“Well, probably not in middle of the n-”

“Yeah, Chief?” Callahan’s voice came through the radio.

“When is Holland supposed to arrive at the hospital?”

“She’ll be dropped off at the ER in about five minutes, Chief.”

“Shit,” Hopper said. He took off in the direction of the ER. Over his shoulder, he shouted at Powell, “You keep an eye on her,” pointing towards Ari’s room.

“What a night,” Hopper said to himself. “What a fucking night.”

3. The Aggravated Sheriff

2:29am

Saturday, December 22, 1985

Roane County Hospital - Roane, Indiana

Sure enough, Barbara Holland was brought into the ER five minutes later. Hopper could barely believe his eyes. Other than some cuts and bruises, she looked perfectly fine.

This can't be her, Hopper thought. Barb died in the Upside Down. He'd seen her body himself. But if this wasn't her, who, or what, had just been brought into the ER? Why were they here? Did it have anything to do with the woman with the gunshot wound?

Whatever the case was, he still had to do his job. And after the doctors had finished their examinations and determined that it was okay for Hopper to interview her, he did just that.

"Barb, I know this must be really difficult for you, and we can take things slow, but I do need to ask you some questions about where you've been. Is that okay?"

Barb nodded, clutching a hospital blanket around herself.

"Okay. The last time anyone saw you was in November of '83, a little over two years ago. You were at a party at Steve Harrington's house. Do you remember what happened after that?"

"I... I was sitting by the pool by myself and a... man came up and held me at knifepoint, said that if I didn't go with him, he'd kill me. So... I went with him, and he led me back to a van and made me get inside. He blindfolded me, and then we drove for a while. When we, um, stopped, he drug me out of the van and threw me down into a storm cellar. That's where he's kept me ever since. But tonight, he forgot to lock the door after he gave me food and supplies - he came every day to do that. So I... I got out and I just ran. I just ran," Barb started to cry, and Hopper handed her a box of tissues.

"Barb, if I got you in front of a sketch artist, would you be able to

describe this man?"

Barb shook her head. "He always wore a mask."

"Did you ever see or hear anyone else?"

Barb shook her head again.

"What about the van? Do you know what kind it was?"

"It was just... it was black."

"Do you know about how long it took to get from where the van was parked to the storm cellar?"

"Maybe... 30 minutes?"

"You were found wandering around the Cooper's farm. Do you know how you got there? Which direction you came from? How long it took you to get there?"

"I don't know... it was dark. I know I was in the woods for a long time. I kept running into things, branches mostly. That's how I got all these cuts," Barb said, lightly touching a mark on her cheek.

These all sound like answers given by someone who watches too much TV, Hopper thought. It didn't sound like someone reliving their trauma, it sounded like someone reading a script. Even the tears seemed fake. But maybe Hopper was reading too much into it. Maybe this was just how she coped.

"Barb, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but you were declared dead last year after the Department of Energy admitted to accidentally exposing you to an experimental chemical compound at Hawkins Lab. Do you have any idea why they might have done that?"

Barb looked genuinely surprised. "No. Everyone thinks I'm dead?"

"I'm sorry."

"Barb!?"

Hopper turned and saw Mr. and Mrs. Holland standing in the doorway, wide-eyed and still in their pajamas. When Mrs. Holland saw her long-lost daughter, she collapsed to the floor, sobbing. Mr. Holland wasn't far behind. Barb walked over, knelt, and wrapped her arms around them. It seemed so...mechanical to Hopper. The Holland's didn't seem to notice.

Over their heads, Hopper saw Callahan waving at him to come out. Hopper sighed. What now?

After managing to squeeze past the Holland's, Hopper joined Callahan in the ER waiting room.

"There's a reporter outside. Just the one. But she's from The Indianapolis Star, one of the papers that broke the story about Barb last year."

Hopper gritted his teeth. He knew exactly who Callahan was talking about. "Stay with the Holland's. I'll be right back."

Hopper made his way outside and found himself face-to-face with a tall, blonde woman in a blue pantsuit that could only be-

"Talia Thorne, Indianapolis Star," the woman said, taking a drag of the cigarette she was smoking. She held her free hand out for Hopper to shake. Hopper didn't take it, and she slowly dropped it.

Last year, when the story had broken about Barb's untimely death at the hands of the Department of Energy, the story the Indianapolis Star had published had painted a picture that had largely blamed the Hawkins Police Department for the Hawkins Labs' "misbehavior". As if it had been their responsibility. Other papers had followed suit, leading to a corruption investigation by the FBI. Kevin Reed, the agent from the Fort Wayne field office who'd led the investigation, and a real asshole, had eventually determined that there was no validity to the allegations, but not until after he'd had his men turn the police station completely over. It had taken Florence months to reorganize everything.

Talia Thorne had penned the initial article.

"I hear Barbara Holland was brought here not too long ago? The supposedly dead girl?" Thorne said. She let her cigarette fall to the ground and stepped on it. She then pulled a small notebook and a pen out of her purse. She stared at Hopper inquisitively.

"Yeah? How'd you hear that?" Hopper asked.

Thorne smiled. "Police scanner."

Shit. Hopper hated those damn things. What else had she heard? "How'd you get here so fast from Indianapolis? You teleport?"

Thorne laughed. "You're funny. I like that. I was actually in Fort Wayne visiting my parents, and of course, Fort Wayne's only a hop, skip, and a jump from here."

"Right. Well, I'm sorry to say you came out here for nothing. We're not talking to the press right now." Hopper turned to go back inside, but what Talia said next made him stop.

"What about your daughter? Is she talking to the press?" Hopper turned back around. "Jane, isn't it? She was enrolled in Hawkins High School in August. But I couldn't find any records for her at the middle school. Curious."

"She's adopted," Hopper said through clenched teeth. Thankfully, last year, during the press fiasco, Jane hadn't been mentioned once. But they had been laying low then. Perhaps a year hadn't been enough.

"From where?"

"That's a personal matter, and I won't be discussing it with you," Hopper said, and marched back into the hospital before Thorne could get in another word. Thankfully, she didn't try to follow him.

As soon as he entered the ER waiting room, Callahan approached him, wringing his hands.

"Callahan, why aren't you with the Holland's?" Hopper asked.

"Chief... that FBI agent who was in charge of the corruption investigation last year? Reed? He's here, talking to the Holland's. He

says the FBI's taking over the case," Callahan said.

"How did they found out so fast!? And how did it get authorized in the middle of the damn night!?"

"He said he heard it on the police scanner, and notified his superiors in Quantico. They gave him the green light to come out here from Fort Wayne."

"Jesus Christ, does everyone in Fort Wayne just sit around those things waiting for something to happen in Hawkins!? Does no one sleep!?"

Hopper pushed past Callahan and made his way back to Barb Holland's room. When he got there, he found Kevin Reed, and another agent he didn't recognize, interviewing Barb. Her parents were standing supportively behind her, still teary-eyed.

When Reed noticed Hopper standing in the doorway, he excused himself and followed Hopper into the hallway.

"Sheriff Hopper-

"I hear you're taking over the investigation."

"Yes."

"On what grounds?"

Reed stared at Hopper like he thought Hopper was an idiot. "On the grounds that this young woman, according to the Department of Energy, and your own Hawkins Lab, was killed in a tragic accident two years ago. Yet here she sits. We at the FBI would like to know how that is. And we don't think you're qualified."

"We were cleared of any corruption charges."

Reed snorted. "That doesn't have anything to do with it."

Over Reed's shoulder, Hopper saw the Holland's and the other FBI agent exit Barb's room.

“Where are they going?” Hopper asked.

“Well, the Holland’s are going home,” Reed said. “All of Barb’s tests came back clear. But it’s really none of your concern. As we’ve established, the Hawkins Police Department is no longer involved in this investigation.”

With that, Reed turned and went to meet the other FBI agent, who was waiting outside of Barb’s now empty room, and the two of them left.

Hopper threw up his hands and looked skyward. “You got anything else for me!?”

Back in the post-op ward, Ari opened her eyes. She’d been observing everything Hopper had been doing. I need to follow Barb, she thought.

She was fairly certain Hopper had been right - “Barb” wasn’t really Barb. A few years ago, back - or forward - in her time, she had done some research on events that had occurred in and around Hawkins, Indiana in the 1980’s. She remembered reading several articles detailing the disappearance, cover-up of said disappearance, and then reappearance of one Barbara Holland. She also remembered that a few days after her reappearance, she was found dead, and unusually decayed. That had been the only noteworthy news at the time it had occurred. Presumably because everything else had been covered up.

Also curious, when Ari had tried to read Barb’s thoughts, she’d found nothing there. It was as if she was some sort of shell that could somehow walk and talk. And pass hospital exams. Ari wasn’t sure what that all meant, she just knew she wouldn’t be able to follow Barb if she couldn’t read her. She could follow her parents, but if she left them, then Ari’d lose her. I guess I’ll just have to do it the old-fashioned way. Well... sort of.

First things first, she needed to get out of the hospital, and she needed to find some clothes, her own having been cut off of her.

She glanced toward the corner of the room, where Officer Powell had pulled the chair Hopper had been sitting in. To explain why she'd been sitting there with her eyes closed, she'd told him she was meditating, and he'd pretty much left her alone. Now, he appeared to have fallen asleep. Excellent.

Next, she closed her eyes again and found the nurse who'd come in to check on her earlier. She searched her mind and found where the hospital scrubs were kept. Ari glanced at Powell one more time to make sure he was asleep, pulled out her IV, then jumped.

Seconds later, Ari found herself in a small storage closet surrounded by green scrub tops and pants. She quickly sorted through them to find something that would fit, then pulled them on, discarding the hospital gown on the floor.

She found Barb's parents - and "Barb" herself, thankfully - in their car, an old Dodge, presumably driving home. Wherever they were going, she'd need to wait until they got there to follow them; she couldn't exactly jump into their car. So, she found a quiet spot outside the hospital grounds - to avoid Hopper - and waited.

4. Strangers in the Night

3:54am

Saturday, December 22, 1985

Sinclair Household - Hawkins, Indiana

Erica had had enough. She tossed off her blankets, got out of bed, and made her way to the living room, where Lucas' radio was broadcasting to the whole house. She couldn't be the only one hearing this, could she!?

"Lucas! Luuuucas! LUCAS!" came Dustin's voice.

Erica picked up the radio and marched to Lucas' room. She opened the door and tossed the radio into the darkness beyond. It hit something with a thud.

"Ow! What the hell!?" Lucas said. A moment later, the light beside his bed came on. He was rubbing the side of his head.

"If you're going to leave that thing laying around, at least turn it off!" Erica said, then slammed the door before her brother could respond.

"LUCAS!!!" Dustin said again.

"Jesus, Dustin, what!?"

"Where have you been!?"

"Uh, sleeping. It's 4 o'clock in the morning."

"You haven't heard anything we've been saying!?"

"No, Dustin, I have not."

"Barb's alive!"

"What?"

"Or something that looks like Barb. She was taken to the hospital a couple of hours ago."

“How do you know this?”

“Police scanner.”

Lucas sighed. Dustin’s mother had bought him a police scanner for Christmas last year, and, as far as Lucas was concerned, it was the worst decision she had ever made. Dustin spent an unreasonable amount of time listening to it, and anytime anything unusual came over it, Dustin insisted they investigate, in case it had something to do with the Upside Down or the Mind Flayer. It never did.

But Barb... this had to be different. And when you took into consideration what had happened at Hopper’s house... Were things starting up again?

“So, are we going to the hospital?”

“No, Will and Jane heard Ms. Byers talking to Hopper on the phone. She’s being discharged. We’re going to stake her out at her house.”

“Okay. Meet you there?”

“Meet you there.”

4:06pm

Saturday, December 22, 1985

Outside the Holland House - Hawkins, Indiana

After Barb had been declared dead last year, her parents had moved into a smaller house on the other side of Hawkins. It wasn’t a bad area, or a bad house, but it definitely screamed: “two people who had lost all hope”. The red sandstone that made up the exterior of the house was cracked in several places, and the white picket fence had several pickets missing. And while many of the houses on the street had had Christmas lights put up, illuminating the street, the Holland house remained dark.

Steve had parked down the street from it, just close enough to see anyone coming or going. Because he had been eavesdropping on the kid’s whole radio conversation, he’d actually been able to make it

there before the Holland's returned from the hospital in Roane. He'd seen Barb enter the house with her parents, followed by two men Steve assumed were FBI agents - Hopper had told Ms. Byers on the phone that they were taking over the investigation.

Not too long after they'd arrived, Steve had seen a Jeep park on the opposite end of the street from him. No one had gotten out. A reporter, maybe, early to the action. Barb's death had been all over the news.

Steve also thought he'd seen a figure appear in the middle of the street right in front of the Holland house, then disappear again. But, of course, that couldn't have been possible. It was probably just exhaustion. He'd had a five-hour drive back from Evansville the day before and still hadn't gotten any sleep.

Then again, that woman had seemingly just appeared in Hopper's living room. That had been weird. Steve wondered who'd shot her, and if she was going to be okay. And why she'd called him 'Dad'. When she'd look at him, she hadn't just seemed delirious from having been shot; she genuinely looked like she'd recognized him.

A knock on his window made him jump, and pulled him out of his thoughts. Steve turned to see Dustin and the rest of the gang - Jane, Mike, Lucas, Will, and Max - waving at him from the street. They were all on their bikes.

Steve turned off the car and got out.

"Steve!" Dustin said. "What are you doing here!?"

"Making sure you guys don't get yourselves into any trouble," Steve said. "I heard you on the radio."

"Has anything been going on?" Lucas asked.

"Not really. The Holland's are in the house with two FBI agents. I think there's a reporter parked at the other end of the street. Or someone else just being nosy."

"So, what exactly is the game plan now that we're here?" Max asked. "Just... wait until something happens?"

Everyone looked to Dustin. "Yeah...pretty much," he said.

Everyone groaned. "Dustin, that's a terrible plan!" Lucas said. "Why do we ever let him make the plans!?"

"I make good plans sometimes," Dustin said, offended.

"Could...maybe someone go knock on the door and ask to see Barb?" Max asked.

Mike rolled his eyes. "At 4 o'clock in the morning?"

"It was just an idea," Max shot back.

"We do need to see inside the house," Lucas agreed.

"I can help with that," a voice said. They all turned.

A woman in hospital scrubs stood on the sidewalk a few feet from them. She had a backpack slung over one shoulder.

"Aren't you the woman from Hopper's living room?" Max asked.

The woman nodded. "Ari."

"Shouldn't you be in the hospital?" Dustin asked.

"No. I, uh, sort of let myself out."

Will pointed at Ari's shoulder, the one without the backpack. "But you're bleeding."

Ari looked down. A patch of blood had soaked through her bandages and onto her scrub top. "Oh, damn," she said. She didn't really seem that concerned, though.

"You said you can help us. How?" Mike asked.

"Well..." Ari stepped forward and pulled the sleeve of her scrub top up. She had the number 021 tattooed on her wrist. "I'm like Jane. Sort of."

Everyone looked to Jane, who was looking between Ari's wrist and

her face, trying to place it. “You know my name? How?”

Ari hesitated. “I’d be happy to explain about that later, but right now, I think there’s a more pressing matter.” She pointed at the Holland house.

“Nothing much has been happening so far. There’s two FBI agents in there. One’s just from the Fort Wayne field office, but the other one is from the Paranormal Investigations division - he was in Fort Wayne on another case, and he was asked to tag along. The FBI knows something’s up. But they’ve just been asking Barb some typical questions, and she’s been giving some typical answers. I don’t think Barb’s really Barb, though - I can’t read her mind. Like she’s not really a person, or something. Also, we need to stay out of sight of that reporter down the street. Especially you,” she said, indicating Jane. “She knows you were involved with Hawkins Lab, but she’s not sure how. Let’s not give her any ideas.”

The group just stared at her.

“...You’re saying you’re a mind reader? And you can teleport? Like you did into Hopper’s house?” Mike asked.

Ari looked impressed. Well, that’s not exactly what happened, but sure, let’s go with that. “Yes, and I can see what’s going on around whoever’s mind I’m reading.”

Now it was everyone else’s turn to look impressed. Steve broke this up by saying, “Okay, like she said, maybe we should just let her do her thing, and we can ask questions later.” Ari looked at Steve in surprise. She’d expected him to be more reluctant.

As if reading her mind, or possibly just her expression, Steve shrugged and said, “I’m not entirely sure we can trust you, but I also don’t think you mean us any harm. And besides, having you spy on the Holland’s is way easier than trying to stop the kids from doing it themselves.”

Fair point, Ari thought. What kind of kids showed up to an undead girls house in the middle of the night, anyway?

"Alright, I'll narrate for you guys," Ari said, then sat herself down on the sidewalk, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. A few seconds later, she said, "Mrs. Holland is in the kitchen making Barb something to eat. Barb is just sitting at the kitchen table with this creepy, blank expression. It's making Mrs. Holland nervous. Mr. Holland is making up the guest bedroom. The two FBI agents..."

4:18pm

Saturday, December 22, 1985

Holland Household - Hawkins, Indiana

"So, what do you think?" Agent Reed asked the other FBI agent. They were standing on the Holland's back porch, out of earshot of the family.

The other FBI agent didn't say anything, just stared out into the darkness, thinking.

His name was Ryan Bannerman, and he'd been helping the Fort Wayne field office with a case where a woman had had the organs eaten out of her stomach, seemingly with human teeth. It had turned out to just be some crazy cannibal, nothing "paranormal", but it had given Reed nightmares when he'd heard about it. Bannerman, on the other hand, had seemed completely unperturbed; he dealt with this sort of thing all the time. That was why Reed had asked him to come to Hawkins.

"How much do you know about what happened at Hawkins Lab?" Bannerman finally asked.

"Enough to complete the corruption investigation at the Hawkins Police Department," Reed said proudly.

Bannerman laughed. "So, nothing, then."

Reed frowned. "What do you mean?"

"That was just a farce, to appease the press," Bannerman said.

"What are you talking about? There was legitimate evidence-"

"No, there wasn't. It was fabricated. What you think happened to Barbara Holland isn't what happened to Barbara Holland. The press were lied to. You were lied to."

Bannerman continued, "Two years ago, scientists at Hawkins Lab opened a... doorway between another version of the timeline - another dimension, if that's easier to understand - that has been taken over by an... entity. Somehow, Barbara Holland was drawn there, and died."

Last year, this entity decided it was bored with the wasteland it had created there, so it tried to come here. But the door was closed in its face." Bannerman looked back toward the house. "So it found another way."

Reed followed Bannerman's gaze, pieced together what he was saying, then turned back to the other agent, annoyed. "Agent Bannerman, I brought you here to help with a serious investigation."

"And I take this investigation very seriously, Agent Reed. What I just told you is the truth. And if you weren't willingly to believe that something strange was going on, you wouldn't have brought me here," Bannerman said.

Reed opened and closed his mouth several times. He knew Bannerman was right. Finally, he said, "You weren't supposed to tell me any of that, were you?"

Bannerman smiled and shook his head.

"Then... why did you?"

"Because I'm going to need your help. And someone else's." Then, in his head, Bannerman thought, Hello, Aria.

4:34pm

Saturday, December 22, 1985

Outside the Holland House - Hawkins, Indiana

Ari opened her eyes with a start. She scrambled to her feet, her heart pounding. Hello, Aria. Nothing like that had ever happened to her

before.

“What happened!?” Mike asked.

Ari looked to Jane. “He’s one of us. Bannerman.”

Jane look surprised. “How do you know?”

“He knew I was in his head.”

“Is that good or bad!?” Mike asked.

“I don’t know.”

Mike threw out his hands. “You can literally read minds, but you don’t know if he’s a good guy or a bad guy?”

“I don’t know what his abilities are. He could have been messing with me.”

“So everything you just told us could have been something he made up?”

“Maybe.”

“Guys, I think it might be time to get out of here,” Steve said, eyeing the Holland house nervously. What if Ari had provoked them?

When the kids reached for their bikes, he said, “No, ditch the bikes. We can come back for them later. Get in the car.”

“We won’t all fit!” Lucas said.

“If you try really hard, you will,” Steve said.

As the kids started cramming themselves into Steve’s car, Ari started toward the house.

“Hey! Where are you going!?” Steve called after her.

“He’s coming out soon,” Ari said. “I’m going to see what he wants.”

“Is that safe?”

Ari shrugged.

“Be careful.”

“Thanks, Steve.”

“I thought it was ‘Dad’?”

Ari looked over her shoulder at him, smiled, then kept on going.

Well, this is going to be fun.